

TRANSACTION NO. 81

FEB. 13TH, 1902

acc 14979  
904 97127

FEB 20  
1902

The Historical and Scientific Society  
of Manitoba



# BRITAIN'S ONE UTOPIA

BY

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An Old Timer



WINNIPEG:

THE MANITOBA FREE PRESS COMPANY

1902

# Britain's One Utopia

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Self builds a "castle in Spain" for its own pleasure: wisdom and benevolence an Utopia for all,—dreaming the ideal of a society where wrong can find no harbourage, want no entry, oppressive distinctions of "caste" or possession be unknown.

That brave old Englishman, Thomas More—afterwards, unhappily for his head—Lord High Chancellor of England—wrote out, in fair Latin,—in his chambers in the City of London, over three centuries ago—his idea of an Utopia, which, since then, modest as are its requirements, has yet found no practical illustration, even among the many seats of the great colonizing race of mankind.

Utopias take form and color from the particular people by whom they are conceived. In Captain Cook's sailor account of the Polynesian Islands of the Pacific—the islands of the blessed—where, amid a delicious clime, Nature is at all charges for life,—one can scarce conceive of a more perfect state. But the aggressive fire and "Berseker" rage of the children of the northern seas would gird at so supine a lot: fashion from the soft occasion matter more astringent for their rough palates.

The primitive history of all the colonies that faced the Atlantic—when the new-found continent first felt the abiding foot of the stranger—from Oglethorpe to Acadia, reveals, alas ! no Utopia, a transplant of elder habitudes, where the rancor of race, caste and rule was found to be too ingrained to yield to even the softening influence of such a sylvan paradise as Virginia. It remained for a later time,—the earlier half of the present century, amid every severity of climate, and under conditions without precedent, and incapable of

repetition,—to evolve a community in the heart of the continent, shut away from intercourse with civilized mankind—that slowly crystalized into a form beyond the ideal of the dreamers—a community, in the past, known faintly to the outer world as the Red River Settlement, which is but the by-gone name for the one Utopia of Britain.

It was: brief as the few decades of its existence, still fate had caught away from time, the clear-cut impress of an exceptional people living under conditions of excellence unthought of by themselves until they had passed away.

A people, whose name in the vast domain, was in the days by gone, sought out and coveted by all. Unknown races had rested here and gone away, leaving only their careful graves behind them. The "Mandans"—the brave, the fair, the beautiful, and the "Cheyennes," pressed by the "Nay-he-owuk," and the "Assin-a-pau-tuk," had quitted their earthen forts on the banks of the streams and urged their way to the broader tide of the Missouri. More fatal to the conquerors came after, the pale-faced "Nemesis" of all Indian life, spying with the instinct of his race, a spot of abounding fertility, where the great water reaches stretched from the mountains to the sea, and southward touched almost the beginning of the great River of the Gulf.

Quick changing his errant camp for barter into a stronghold for the trade, making the "Niste-y-ak" of the "Crees" his settled home, the white man's grasp of the fair domain but grew with years. From the tumbling seas of the far north came with the men, fair-haired, blue-eyed women and children. The glamor of the spot, the teeming soil, the great and lesser game, that swam past,—or wandered by their doors—soon drew to this Mecca of the Plains and Waters—the roving, scattered children of the trade—Bourgeois and voyageur alike heading their lithe and dusky broods. Here touched and fused all habitudes of life, the blended races, knit by ties conserving every divergence of pursuit, all forms of faith and thought, free from assail or taint begotten of contact with aught other than them-

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selves, hid and away even as Rasselas in the mountains of Ethiopia. A people whose unchecked primal freedom was after strengthened by the light hand of laws that conserved what they most desired; whose personal relations with their rulers were of such primitive character as to make the Government in every sense paternal; the petty tax on imports attending its administration one practically unfelt !

A people whose land was dotted with schools and churches, to whose maintenance their contributions were so slight as to be unworthy of mention. The three separate religious denominations, holding widely different tenets—elsewhere the cause of bitter sectarian feeling,—was with them so unthought of as to give—where all topics were eagerly sought—no room for even fireside discussion. Side by side, “upon the voyage,”—as they termed their lake or inland trips—the Catholic and the Protestant knelt and offered up their devotions—following the ways of their fathers,—no more to be made a subject of dispute than a difference in color or height.

The cursings and obscenities that taint the air and brutalize life elsewhere, were in this quaint old settlement unknown. Sweet thought, pure speech, went hand in hand, clad in nervous, pithy old English, or a “patois” of the French, mellowed and enlarged by their constant use of the liquid Indian tongues, flowing like soft-sounding waters about them, their daily talk came ever welcome to the ear.

Where locks for doors were unknown, or, known, unused, where a man’s word, even in the transfer of land, was held as his bond—honesty became a necessity. Lawyers were none. Law was held to be a danger. Still the importance attached by simple minds to an appearance in public, the amusing belief cherished by some, that, if permitted to plead his own case, exert his unsuspected powers, there could be but one result, brought some honest souls to the Red River forum, with matter of much moment, “the like never heard before.” None can read the quaint, minutely-detailed record of these “causes celebres” that shook the little households as with a great wind, without a smile, nor resist the conviction that no scheme of

an English Utopia can safely be pronounced perfect without some such modest tribunal to afford vent for that ever-germinating desire for battle inherent in the race.

Their manners were natural, cordial, and full of a light-some heartiness that robed accost with sunshine,—a quietude withal—that rare quality—that irked them not at all—one gathered from their Indian kin-folk. Their knowledge of each other was simply universal—their kin ties almost as general. These ties were brightened and friendships reknit in the holiday season of the year, the leisure of the long winters, when the far-scattered hewn log houses—small to the eye—were ever found large enough to hold the welcome arrivals,—greeted with a kiss that said, “I am of your blood.” These widespread affiliations broke down aught like “caste.” Wealth or official position were practically unheeded by a people in no fear of want and unaccustomed to luxuries, who sought their kinswoman and her brood for themselves, not what they had in store. The children and grandchildren of men, however assured in fortune or position, wove anew equalizing ties, seeking out their mates as they came to hand; hence a genial, not a downward level, putting to shame fine-spun theories of democracy in other lands—spun, not worn.

This satisfaction of station—as said—grew out of the slight exertion necessary for all the wants of life, with unlimited choice of the finest land on the continent; the waters alive with fish and aquatic fowl; rabbits and prairie fowl at times by actual cart-load; elk not far, and countless buffalo behind,—furnishing meat, bedding, clothing and shoes to any who could muster a cart or go in search; the woods and plains in season, ripe with delicious wild fruit, for present use or dried for winter,—the whole backed by abundant bread-stuffs. The quota of the farmers along the rivers, whose fertile banks were dotted by windmills, whose great arms stayed the inconstant winds, and yoked the fickle couriers to the great car of general plenty.

Poverty in one sense certainly existed; age and improvidence are always with us, but it was not obtrusive, made

apparent only towards the close of the long winter, when some old veteran of the canoe or saddle would make a "grand promenade" through the settlement, with his ox and sled, making known his wants, incidentally, at his different camps among his old friends, finding always before he left his sled made the heavier by the women's hands. This was simply done; few in the wild country but had met with sudden exigencies in supply, knew well the need at times of one man to another, and, when asked for aid, gave willingly.. Or it may be that some large-hearted, jovial son of the chase had over-rated his winter store, or underrated the assiduity of his friends. His recourse in such case being the more carefully estimated stock of some neighbor, who could in no wise suffer the reproach to lie at his door, that he had turned his back, in such emergence, upon his good-natured, if injudicious, countryman.

This practical communism—borrowed from the Indians, among whom it was inviolable—was, in the matter of hospitality, the rule of all,—a reciprocation of good offices, in the absence of all houses of public entertainment, becoming a social necessity. The manner of its exercise hearty, a knitting of the people together,—no one was at a loss for a winter camp when travelling. Every house he saw was his own, the bustling wife, with welcome in her eyes, eager to assure your comfort. The supper being laid and dealt sturdily with, the good man's pipe and your own alight and breathing satisfaction,—a neighbor soul drops in to swell the gale of talk, that rocks you at last into a restful sleep. How now, my masters ! Smacks not this of Arcady ?

Early and universal marriage was the rule, our Utopia denying no man or woman at the season when the ductile sympathies intertwine most easily,—the intended happiness wrought in with married life, and the care of offspring. There were thus no defrauded women—called, by a cruel irony, "old maids;" no isolated, mistaken men, cheated out of themselves, and robbed of the best training possible for man. This vital fact was fraught with every good.

The strategetic little god who "laughs at locksmiths," would have found no locks here to shatter with his fabled arrows, but doors wide open, and the entire family ready to deal fairly by him—no more. The tremulous tenderness and dramatic fervor marking the "grande passion" in emotional natures, was here quite out of place, where sentiment was supplied by constancy, the tie formed made one for life.

The quivers of the comely, dark-eyed dames of the Red River were full of arrows. The man who bartered his liberty for their maiden smiles was "a family man" by brevet upon his wedding day. Children tumbled in upon him so fast that it was a matter of not a little adroitness—in the night season—to cross the floor where they slept—smothered in robes—healthy exceedingly.

This fecundity, bringing uneasiness to men of moderate means elsewhere, and disturbing the Malthusian philosopher, was here a source of strength and comfort. The joy of contact being never dashed with a thought of the future, the young birds leaving the parent nest, only exchanged it for one near at hand—land for the taking; a house to be built, a wife to be got—a share of the stock, some tools and simple furniture, and the outfit was complete. The youngest son remained at home to care for the old father and mother, and to him came the homestead when they were laid away. The conditions were all faithful, home life dear indeed.

To the Hunters accepting their fall-woods with errant wing, a wilder thought could scarce be broached than that of solicitude as to the future of their young. Boys who sat a horse almost as soon as they could walk, whose earliest plaything was a bow and arrows; girls as apt in other ways, happy, faith in their environment, one long sustained.

With so large an infusion of Norse blood and certain traditions anent "usquebah" and "barley bree" it would—with so large a liberty—be naturally expected, a liberal proportion of drouthy souls, but with an abundance of what cheers and distinctly inebriates in their midst they were a temperate people in its best sense, with no tippling houses to daily tempt

them astray their supplies of spirits were nearly always for festive occasions. "Regales" after a voyage or weddings that lasted for days, and these at times under such guard as may be imagined from the presence of a custodian of the bottle, who exercised with what skill he might his certainly arduous task of determining instantly when hilarity grew into excess. This novel feature applies, however, almost entirely to the English-speaking part of the people. The Gallic and Indian blood of the Hunters disdained such poor toying with a single cherry and drank and danced and drank and danced again with an abandon, an ardor and full surrender to the hour characteristic alike of the strength of their heads, the lightness of their heels and their contempt of any restraint whatever.

These were, however, but the occasional and generous symposiums of health and vigor that rejects of itself continued indulgence. Our Utopia would be cold and pallid indeed lacking such expression of redundant strength, and joyful vigor.

Certainly the greatest negative blessing that this exceptional people enjoyed, was that they had no politics, no vote. The imagination of the average "party man" sinks to conceive a thing like to this; yet, if an astounding fact to others, no more gracious one can be conceived for themselves. In the unbroken peace in which they lived politics would be but throwing the apple of discord in their midst, an inoculation of disease that they might in the delirium that marked its progress vehemently discuss remedies to allay it.

Another great negative advantage was the peculiar and admirable intelligence of the great body of the population, in that they were almost strangers to books. The small circulating collection in their midst attracting little or no attention, their own limited to a Bible or prayer book,—many not these. With their minds in this normal healthy state, unharassed by the sordid assail of care, undepressed by any sense whatever of inferiority, unfrayed by the trituration of the average book, their powers of apprehension—singularly clear—had full scope to appropriate and resolve the world about them, which they did to such purpose as to master every exigence of their lives.



Seizing upon the minutest detail affecting them they mastered as if by intuition all difficult handiwork, making with but few tools everything they required from a windmill to a horseshoe.

Their real education was in scenes of travel or adventure in the great unbroken regions sought out by the fur trade, their retentive memories reproducing by the winter fireside or summer camp pictures so graphic as to commend themselves to every ear.

The tender heart and true of the brave old knight, Sir Thomas More, put a ban upon hunting in his Utopia. Alas and alack for the wayward proclivities of our Utopians, predaceous creatures all, hunting was to them as the breath of their nostrils, for to them, unlike the sons of Adam, it was given—with their brothers resting upon the tranquil river—to lay upon the altar of their homes alike the fruits of the earth and the spoils of the chase.

What pen can paint the life of these "Chasseurs of the Great Plains," tell of the gathering of the mighty Half-Breed clan going forth—each Spring and Fall—in a tumult of carts and horsemen to their boundless preserves, the home of the buffaloes, whose outrangers were the grizzly bear, the branching elk, the flying antelope that skirted the great columns, the last relieving the heavy rolling gait of the herds by a speed and airy flight that mocked the eye to follow them, scouting the dull trot of the prowling wolves—attent upon the motions of their best purveyor—man.

What a going forth was theirs ! this array of Hunters, with their wives and little ones ; this new tribe clad in semi-savage garniture, streaming across the plains with cries of glee and joyance ; the riders in their "traverie" of arms and horse equipment—the vast "brigade" of carts and bands of following horses, kept to the cavalcade by those reckless jubilants—the boys—seeming a part of the creatures they bestrode. The sunshine and the flying fleecy clouds, emulous in motion with the troop below : what life was in it all ; what freedom and what breadth !

And as the sun sank apace and the guides and Headmen rode apart on some o'er-looking height and reined their cattle in, the closing up of the flying squadron for the evening camp, the great circular camp of these our Scythians proof against sudden raid crowning the landscape far and wide, seen, yet seeing every foe, whose subtle coming through the short-lived night was watched by eyes as keen as were their own.

When reached, their bellowing, countless quarry: the plain alive and trembling with their tumult, what tournament of mail-clad knights but was as a stilted play to this rude shock of man and beast—carrying in a cloud of dust that hid alike the chaser and the chased, till done their work the frightened herds swept onward and away, leaving the sward flecked with the huge forms that made the hunters' wealth! And now! on: fall prosaic from the wild charge, the danger of the fierce *mêlée*!—drifting from the camp the carts appear piled ruddily in a trice with bosses, tongues, back fat and juicy haunch, a feast unknown to hapless kings.

We but glance at this great feature, that fed so fat our Utopia, leaving to imagination the return, the trade, the feasting and the fiddle when lusty legs embossed by "quills" or beads strove emulous in that mysterious articulation—the dance.

The outcome of the "Plain Hunt" was not only a wide spread plenty among the Hunters on reaching the quiet farmer folk upon the rivers, but also the diffusion of a sunshine a tone of generous serenity that sat well on the chivalry of the chase—the bold riders of the Plain.

Beneficent nature nowhere makes her compensations more gratefully felt than in the summer season of our Utopia of the north, where the purest and most vivifying of atmospheres hues with a wealth of sunshine the great reaching spaces of verdure covered with flowers in a profusion rivaling their exquisite beauty. Green waving copses dot the level sward, and rob the sky line of its sea-like sweep. The winding rivers, signalled by their wooded banks, upon which rest the comfortable homes of the dwellers in the "hidden land"

guarding their little fields close by where the ranked grain standing awaits the sickle, turning from green to gold and so unhurried resting. The shining cattle couched outside in ruminant content or cropping lazily the succulent feast spread wide before them; the horses, wary of approach, just seen in compact bands upon the verge; the patriarchal windmills—at wide spaces—signalling to each other their peaceful task; the little groups of horsemen coming adown the winding road, or stopping to greet some good wife and her gossip—going abroad in a high railed cart in quest of trade, or friendly call. And as the day wanes, the sleek cow, with considered careful walk and placid mien, wend their way homeward, bearing their heavy udders to the house-mother, who, pail in hand awaiting their approach, pauses for a moment to mark the feathered boaster at her feet, as he makes his parting vaunt of a day well spent and summons "Partlet" to her vesper perch hard by.

O'er all the scene there rests a brooding peace, bespeaking tranquil lives, repose trimmed with the hush of night, and effort healthful and cool as the freshening airs of morn.

Longfellow—moving all hearts to pity—has painted in "Evangeline" the enforced dispersion of the French in "Acadia." Who shall tell the homesick pain, the vain regrets, the looking back of those who peopled our "Acadia?" No voice bids them away; they melt before the fervor of the time; hasten lest they be 'whelmed by the great wave of life rolling towards them. Vain retreat, the waters are out and may not be stayed. It is fate! it is right, but the travail is sore, the face of the mother is wet with tears.

The outline sketch proposed is at an end, we have striven to be faithful to the true lines. There is no obligation to perpetuate unworthy "minutiae." Joy is immortal! sorrow dies! the petty features are absorbed in the broad ones; those capable only of conveying truth.

The Red River settlement in the days adverted to is an idyl simple and pure: a nomadic pastoral, inwrought with

Indian traits and color, our one acted poem in the great national prosaic life. When the vast country in the far future is teeming with wealth and luxury, this light rescued and defined will shine adown the fullness of the time with hues all its own. The story that it tells be as a sweet refreshment: a dream made possible, called by those who shared in its great calm, " Britain's One Utopia."

F. L. HUNT.

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## THE LATE PETER WARREN WENTWORTH BELL

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Among the forty-two unfortunate passengers who perished miserably when the ill-fated steamer "Islander" went to her doom early in the morning of 15th August, 1901, near Juneau, Alaska, was Chief Factor Peter Warren Wentworth Bell, of the Hudson's Bay Company, and for many years a corresponding member of the Historical Society, Winnipeg. Mr. Bell was on his return to Victoria, B.C., in company with Dr. John Duncan, M.D., of that city—another victim—from a special journey made by them to Dawson City and Stewart River, Yukon Territory. On this occasion they both travelled by Peterboro' canoe 700 miles of the distance between Skagway and Dawson, and from there to the Stewart, 90 miles each way, on horseback.

Mr. Bell was the eldest son of the late Chief Trader John Bell, a native of Argyllshire, Scotland, who for many years held the charge of Fort Good Hope, Mackenzie River, North West Territory, and was born at Norway House, Rupert's Land, on 21st December, 1831. His maternal grandfather was Chief Factor P. W. Dease, of Dease and Simpson, the celebrated Hudson's Bay Arctic explorers. In due time, like many of his country-born contemporaries, he was sent to school to the old Red River Settlement, and there, like many of them, he acquired a sound practical business education, under the zealous and talented Academy teacher of that time, the late Rev. John McCallum. Like many of them also, Mr. Bell began life as an apprentice clerk in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company. He entered on his duties in the Spring of 1852, and finally, after a progressively successful career of forty-two years, through the various grades of Clerk, Chief Trader, Factor and Chief Factor, he retired from the service in the autumn of 1893.

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With the exception of a summer trip on which he accompanied his old master and life-long friend, Chief Factor and Resident Governor, Donald Alexander Smith (now Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal, G.C.M.G., and Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company in London, England), when he presided at the last Fur-Trade Council, which met at Norway House in July, 1870, and again during the open season of 1886, when he was associated with Chief Trader E. K. Beeston, in conducting an inspection of the Company's posts in Cumberland district, Mr. Bell's entire period of service was passed at Trade Stations, and in charge of districts situated in the Montreal Department. Many of his earlier years were spent at various points on the lower St. Lawrence River and on the coast of Labrador, mainly under the present Lord Strathcona. He was for several outfits later Manager at La Clôche on Lake Huron, and for twenty years at Michipicoten district, on Lake Superior. Then he was situated for a year or two at Chapleau, C. P. R., as "headquarters" of the latter, and afterwards held the charge of Esquimaux Bay district, until he retired in 1893. It is almost needless to state that Mr. Bell was a very interested, faithful, and valued servant of the Company—his successive promotions prove this. In 1866 he received the commission of a Chief Trader; in 1872 that of a Factor, and in 1879 he attained the highest position—that of a Chief Factor—conferred upon any officer in their employ.

The Hudson's Bay service has produced numerous men of good, and some of marked, ability; but it may be asserted with confidence that in point of physical courage, enterprise, and capability of endurance, the officers and servants of the Company have, as a class, the most distinguished record of any body of men in the British Empire, outside of the naval and military services. Those who personally knew and admired the genial, hearty, and energetic nature of the much lamented "Peter Bell," will readily agree that in the foregoing respects he was fully entitled to rank with the very foremost of his fur-trade predecessors and contemporaries. Even to the last his cheerful fortitude was amazing.

The following testimony from an old and intimate Eastern friend will surely confirm all this; he recently wrote:

"Late in the Fall of 1854, Mr. Bell was removed from the post of Godbout to Mingan, and on his way there he was shipwrecked and narrowly escaped drowning,—in fact, it was thought he had perished, and a man was therefore sent from Isle Jeremie to replace him. He had an outpost also besides the charge of Mingan. This was named Natashquan, situated a hundred miles to the Eastward. During the winter he visited that place, and when returning therefrom while travelling with one man and a sled of dogs over rather thin and insecure ice, he and his man went through, as did the sled—the man was drowned, but Mr. Bell got hold of one of the dog traces and the dogs hauled him out to solid ice. This accident occurred on La Cornez river, some thirty miles from Mingan. He was wet through, of course, and had nothing to strike a fire with. He saved but one of his snowshoes and lost both mitts and cap! He kept tramping round the small island on which he landed, all night, in order to keep himself from freezing to death,—he was afraid to travel during the darkness for fear of again breaking through the ice. There was not a solitary settler or hunter at that time between both points. He, however, started out at dawn next day—the accident had happened after sunset—and never stopped until he reached Mingan. When he got there he found his toes frozen and lost several of them. In my opinion this was a remarkable feat of endurance—few men would have got so far after such a cold bath, and under such terribly trying circumstances.

"In 1856, Mr. Bell was appointed to Esquimaux Bay district, Labrador, then in charge of Mr. Smith, now Lord Strathcona. He took passage in the brigantine "Independent"—the wind being contrary, they anchored at a small place called Tug Harbor. In the night the wind changed suddenly to the Southeast, blowing a gale right on the shore—the vessel dragged her anchors and got stranded. Mr. Bell was washed ashore clinging to the mainboom, and nar-

“rowly escaped drowning. It is believed that two of the crew  
 “perished! When the gale ceased the vessel was high and  
 “dry on the beach. The cargo was landed and piled on shore,  
 “then a new danger threatened, a number of Newfoundland  
 “fishermen arrived and were going to take possession of the  
 “goods, as they considered all wrecks as fair game for plunder.  
 “Mr. Bell and the crew barricaded themselves behind the  
 “goods, and held them off with their guns until assistance  
 “arrived from Rigolette, which is about sixty miles from Tug  
 “Harbor.”

After his retirement Mr. Bell resided for several years in Kingston, Ontario, and latterly at Vancouver, B. C. A well known Winnipeg passenger on the “Islander” who narrowly escaped death by drowning, states that he held a long cheery conversation with Mr. Bell in the saloon cabin, some three or four hours before she struck on a sunken iceberg. This was the last he ever saw of him; but as the body has never been recovered, in all probability, from what we know of his fertility of resource, and the experience acquired in previous shipwreck disasters, Mr. Bell on finding that the steamer was doomed, lost his life in attempting to fetch from his cabin a large number of letters that had been entrusted to him at Dawson for posting in Vancouver, as well as certain papers, etc., of value belonging to Dr. Duncan and himself. On this supposition he might have failed to reach the deck ere she took the fatal plunge, and consequently went to the bottom in her, along with a number of other similarly entrapped unfortunates, including the sad case of Mr. Keating, of Victoria, and his two sons. It is difficult for anyone who knew him, to imagine that he would not otherwise have succeeded in saving his own life. Mr. Bell was one of the best known and most popular of the Company's officers. He was, also, like many of his inland colleagues in the service, a keen sportsman and an excellent shot, and he had no superior, and but few equals, as a traveller on snowshoes. The news of his untimely death was a terrible shock to his family, and it is still



deeply regretted by his numerous friends and acquaintances throughout Canada, and by some also in the United States.

In September, 1866, Mr. Bell was married in Belleville, Ontario, to the beautiful Miss Ellen S. Dupont, a sister of Major Dupont, of Victoria, B. C. Three sons and two daughters were born to them. One of the daughters is married to Colonel Pemberton, of Victoria, and the other resides with her mother. Wentworth, the eldest son, is one of the Canadian soldiers in South Africa; the second, "Jack," a noted Rugby and hockey player, formerly of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, Winnipeg, is now on the staff of the branch of that bank in Dawson, Y. T., and the third son is employed in connection with the Southern Pacific Railway, in the State of California.